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Mention Anglais, Arts et Médias

Cultural Transpositions in translating Friends

Problèmes de transferts culturels dans la traduction de l'humour de la série Friends

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges and strategies involved in the cultural translation of humor in the American Sitcom *Friends*, with a focus on its French dubbed and subtitled versions. Building on the theories of Vinay and Darbelnet, Guidère, and Hespel, the paper looks at how culturally based jokes are translated from one linguistic and cultural system to another, often requiring creative adaptations. Trough a detailed comparative analysis of selected lines from the first season, this paper examines whether the humor is preserved, lost, or transformed, and which techniques (substitution, compensation, deletion, …) are employed. The study also reflects on the implication of audiovisual constraints and the translator's role as a cultural mediator. By integrating humor theory and translation theory, this paper shows the conflict between fidelity and cultural intelligibility.

Key words: humor, cultural references, translation, subtitles, dubbing, compensation, adaptation, incongruity, audiovisual translation (AVT)

Cette étude explore les défis et stratégies impliqués dans la traduction de l'humour culturel dans la sitcom américaine *Friends*, dont un intérêt tout particulier sur les versions françaises doublées et sous-titrées. En s'appuyant sur les théories de Vinay et Darbelnet, Guidère et Hespel, ce papier s'intéresse à la manière dont les blagues ancrées dans la culture sont traduites d'un système linguistique et culturel à un autre, ce qui appelle souvent à des adaptations créatives. Par une étude comparative détaillée de lignes de dialogues choisies, ce papier examine la conservation, la perte ou la transformation de l'humour, ainsi que les techniques employées (substitution, compensation, suppression, …). Cette étude reflète également les implications des contraintes audiovisuelles et le rôle du traducteur comme médiateur culturel. En incorporant les théories de l'humour aux théories de la traduction, ce papier montre le conflit entre fidélité et compréhensibilité culturelle.

Mots-clés : humour, références culturelles, traduction, sous-titres, doublage, compensation, adaptation, incongruité, traduction audiovisuelle (TAV)

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1. Introduction

1.1. State of the question and definitions

Translation has always been a part of international and intercultural communication between humans. We have always translated our own language into the language of our neighbors in order to communicate and trade with them. It is also well known that with every language comes a different culture with a whole set of linguistic and cultural references. Therefore, translating one language to another not only involves translating words but translating these cultural references as well. This paper will attempt to study the way these cultural transpositions in the French translation of the first season of the world-famous sitcom *Friends*. Both the dubbed and subtitled translations will be studied and compared to each other and to the original English version.

Vinay and Darbelnet in *Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais*, argue that:

> *"il est possible de comparer plusieurs traductions d'un même original, d'en rejeter certaines comme Mauvaises, d'en louer d'autres pour leur fidélité et leur movement. Il y aurait donc pour un texte donné non pas une traduction unique, mais un choix devant lequel le traducteur a hésité avant de proposer sa solution." (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958, p. 23)*

They argue that it is possible to compare several different translations of the same given text, to accept some and reject others, and that this would suggest that the translator is faced with a choice and hesitates before giving his final translation. This is true for any translation of any given text and as proof, this is why this paper offers a comparative study of the French subtitles and the French dubbed version of the dialogues of *Friends*.

Vinay & Darbelnet outline 7 technical methods of translation: 3 direct methods (borrowing, calc, literal translation) and 4 oblique methods (transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation)

Translation can be studied according to several approaches. Vinay & Darbelnet used a comparative stylistic approach and Guidère in his *Introduction à la traductologie* comments on their approach. Guidère does not praise nor criticize

Vinay & Darbelnet, he contextualizes their dated approach with studies done by others like Larose in *Théorie contemporaines de la traduction*, 1989, Lederer in *La Traduction d'aujourd'hui*, 1994, Ladmiral in *Traduire: Théorème pour la traduction*, 1979, before concluding on the abandonment of this approach for its search for word-to-word equivalences rather than for equivalences of message.

In the third chapter of his introductory book Guidère delineates several other approaches to the practice of translation after the comparative stylistic approach of Vinay & Darbelnet. Those relevant to our study are the following: the "theoretical linguistic" approach, largely defined by various works by George Mounin between 1955 and 1976. The "applied linguistics" approach poposed by J.C. Catford in 1965 is partially rejected by Guidère, which he deems lacking a certain "dynamic" dimension. The sociolinguistics approach, last of the linguistic approaches presented by Guidère, which expands the study of a language to its social context, appeared in the United States in the 60s with authors like Labov, Gumperz and Hymes. Maurice Pernier in 1978 defines the term "translation" threefold: as a result, a process, and a comparison (Pergnier, 2017).

The hermeneutic approach aims at distancing linguistics as the main way to study translation. "Far from objectivizing the text by keeping a critical distance, the translator is invited to approach it subjectively and adopt an internal point of view to be as close as possible to the 'source'." (Guidère, 2008, p. 48) According to George Steiner[1], the hermeneutic approach is articulated in 4 phases: confidence, aggression, incorporation, and compensation. (Guidère, 2008, p. 49) Guidère gives praise to this approach for its innovative and dynamic perspective.

With the ideological approach Guidère wonders how to differentiate between "culture" and "ideology" and whether translation is always ideological. (Guidère, 2008, p. 50). Berman (Berman, 1984) talks about two types of translations: "ethnocentric" translations which put forward the point of view of the target language and "hypertextual" ones which put emphasis on the implicit links between the texts and the various cultures. This approach really only refueled the

[1] Steiner, G. (1975). *After Babel: Aspects of language and translation*. Oxford University Press.

already-existing debate of whether to be accurate as much as possible to the original text or whether making the text as idiomatic as possible to correspond to the target language, the age-old debate between source-oriented and target-oriented translators ("*sourcier vs cibliste*" in French). This approached undeniably showed the illusion of "neutrality" of the translator, and Guidère argues that this approach has an important drawback: everything can be ideologized and this approach risks annihilating any intercultural debate through translation. (Guidère, 2008, p. 52)

The textual approach posits that every discourse can be "put into text". Consequently, this imposes a preliminary textual analysis to ensure a full understanding of the text to be translated. However several perspectives exist of this textual approach, which are said to be the dictating factor of the resulting translation: the type of text, the envisioned function of the text, the purpose, the meaning, the context, the ideology. (Guidère, 2008, p. 55) Discursive analysis also serves as a way to show the cultural marking of terminology. The process of metaphorization in discursive analysis shows metaphors as markers of cultural visions and ideological points of view. This approach lets the translator operate mainly as a cultural mediator. (Guidère, 2008, p. 56)

The semiotic approach studies the differences between the linguistic systems of signifying of the different languages. From this semiotic point of view the translator works on "objects" which can show signs from several systems, but which come together to make a signifying whole. This is particularly useful when translating advertising, comics, television shows, websites, … (Guidère, 2008, p. 58) This advantage of this approach according to Guidère is that it offers the translators the possibility of treating several "worlds" with the appropriate conceptual tools. It is a all-encompassing approach which seems to coincide well with our globalized word marked by the convergence of media. (Guidère, 2008, p. 60)

Guidère also presents the various known and popular theories of translation in the following chapter (Guidère, 2008, p. 77): the "interpretative" theory insists on the preeminence of meaning and its understanding in the process of translation; the "action" theory insists on the central role of the translator as an economic

operator whose role is to be a link between the sponsor and the client; the "*skopos*" theory stems from the postulate that there is no translation without a specific goal and that the function of the text determines the translation method; the "game" theory focuses on the contractual dimension of translation and insists on the need to know the "rules of the game" before translating; the "polysystem" theory sees translation as a part of larger literary ensemble and recommends to have knowledge of the "norms" that rules the system to translate efficiently.

Several strategies of translation exist and can be used, one at a time or in conjunction. Guidère names three modes of translation[2]:

- Adaptation: classified as the seventh and most complicated form of translation by Vinay & Darbelnet[3]. Within this larger term, Guidère delineates 3 forms:
    - Deletion: the omission of non-translation of a part of the original text
    - Adjunction: the addition of information that is absent in the original text
    - Substitution: the replacing of a cultural element from the original by another from the target language, which is deemed equal but is not necessarily a direct translation.

    These facets of adaptation will be explicated with the examples in the following pages

- Explication: this practice aims at making explicit inn the target language what was only implicit in the source language. This was first introduced by Vinay & Darbelnet (1958)
- Compensation: the mitigation of a loss of effect by the recreation of a similar effect in the target language. Hervey & Higgins[4] delineate 4 types of compensation

[2] (Guidère, 2008, p. 86)
[3] (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958, p. 55)
[4] Hervey, S. G. J., & Higgins, I. (1994). *Thinking translation: A course in translation method, French-English* (Repr. with corr). Routledge.

- Compensation in kind: “making up for one type of textual effect in the [source text] by another type in the [target text].” (p.35)
- Compensation in place: “making up for the loss of a particular effect found at a given place in the [source text] by re-creating a corresponding effect at an earlier or later place in the [target text].” (p.37)
- Compensation by merging: “to condense [source text] features carried over a relatively long stretch of text (say, a complex phrase) into a relatively short stretch of the [target text] (say, a single word or a simple phrase).” (p.38)
- Compensation by splitting “may be resorted to, if the context allows, in cases where there is no single [target language] word that covers the same range of meaning as a given [source text] word.” (p.39)

Venuti in *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, mentions two approaches to translation: domestication and foreignization. Domestication can be seen as the erasing, in part or totally, of the source language’s culture to replace it with the target language’s culture, resulting in a text which feels native in the target language, while Foreignization offers more linguistic fidelity by preserving the original content even if it feels more foreign to the reader.

1.2. Scope of the study

It is however not the whole process of translation of the succeeding episodes which is under study in this paper but rather the instances of humor in the series which are based in cultural references specific to the English-speaking cultural sphere and especially the North American cultural sphere. In this paper the question at stake is therefore to determine how this culturally based humor has been translated into French, if it was kept unchanged, it if was made explicit or completely was modified to better suit the French speaking cultural sphere, and to determine whether a specific strategy was adopted in order to translate said culturally based humor.

As such, Jacqueline Henry's book "*La Traduction des jeux de mots*", *The Translation of Plays on Words*, offers a welcomed approach to the field of translation and to what has long been thought "untranslatable". However, her approach is not totally useful to this present study for the simple fact that Henry's study focuses on punctual plays on words and not jokes or longer humorous discourses. Her study is therefore more attuned to an analysis of the individual puns, anagrams, and rhymes, rather than to a broader laughable retort or joke as what this present paper aims to study.

Calling back the source-oriented vs. target-oriented debate, Magdalena Adamczyk wrote in 2014 in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* a paper called "Language-Based Humour in Translation: A Comparative Study of Approaches to Rendering Shakespeare's Wordplay into Polish". Although I do not speak nor write Polish her approach to humor in translation is just as relevant to this present study as Henry's book mentioned above. Adamczyk's study focuses on two translations of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, one source-oriented (local, micro-analytic) and the other target-oriented (global, macro-analytic). The former aims at fidelity at cost of humor in Polish while the latter aims at rendering humor Polish at the cost of fidelity. Adamczyk concludes after a comparative study of both translation that puns are partially translatable: sometimes a Polish equivalent can be found but this is not the majority of cases, she emphasizes that successful humor translation requires a careful balance of linguistic precision and cultural adaptation.

Frédérique Brisset wrote a chapter in "*La Traduction, mediation et médiatisation des cultures*", (Translation, Mediation and Broadcasting of Cultures) entitled "Médiation Interculturelle et traduction audio-visuelle : quand traduire c'est (s')adapter, le cinéma de Woody Allen", (Intercultural Mediation and Audiovisual Translation: when translating is adapting, Woody Allen's movies). This chapter deals with the type of cultural transfers which are of interest in this present study, although Brisset deals with cultural transfers in general while I wish to examine more particularly those involved with the humoristic aspect of the show *Friends*. Brisset explains that the mediating function between cultures is very important in audiovisual translation. Fictional cinema aims at mimicking reality in

spite of its artificiality and thereby offers specific cultural phenomena. Building on Umberto Eco's writing, Brisset raises the question of the transfer of cultural references in the translation of movies especially in dubbed versions. The spectator has a "personal encyclopedia" of cultural references, a minimum of which is shared with the members of his or her culture. "*une compétence encyclopédique se fonde sur des données culturelles socialement acceptées en raison de leur "constance" statistique.*" (an encyclopedic competence is based on cultural data socially accepted because of their statistical "constancy") (Eco, 1985, p. 17). Therefore, the cultural references intended by the original author can be problematic the "personal encyclopedia" of the cultural sphere targeted by the translation. "The fame of many celebrities or institutions differ from one civilization to the next, leading to translation hypotheses more or less fruitful from the translator and, in the following, from the final audience." (Brisset, 2015, p. 285)

As mentioned above, this study will focus on the television series *Friends*, aired in the United States on NBC between September 22, 1994 and May 6, 2004. The American situation comedy (sitcom) showcases the lives of six friends living in the appartement complex in Manhattan. The cast includes Jennifer Aniston (as Rachel), Courteney Cox (as Monica), Lisa Kudrow (as Phoebe), Matt LeBlanc (as Joey), Matthew Perry (as Chandler) and David Schwimmer (as Ross). The show is composed of 236 episodes, spread over 10 seasons. Each episode runs for about 20 to 30 minutes. It was created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. The series was produced by Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions, in association with Warner Bros. Television. The original executive producers were Crane, Kauffman and Kevin Bright, with Adam Chase, Michael Curtis, Greg Malins, Scott Silveri, Shana Goldberg-Meehan, Andrew Reich and Ted Cohen being promoted in later seasons.

Although comprised of 10 seasons, I chose to work on the earliest of them, season 1. I chose this sitcom because it had a fairly popular reception in France as well as the rest of the world, and I wanted to work on a sitcom that had aired before the widespread of the Internet and the globalization of modern pop culture. Although it could be argued that pop culture started its globalizing process thanks to American and British soft powers and cultural dominance during and after World

War 2, it is undeniable that the emergence of the Internet has considerably accelerated the homogenization of popular culture.

1.3. Method

In order to gather the data necessary for the study I watched every episode of the first season of Friends, taking care to compare for each episode the original version (OV), the dubbed version in French (DV) and the French subtitles (FS). I had access to these episodes and their various versions through the streaming platform *Canal+*. As said above, I shall pick out various lines of dialogue which contain humor based on cultural references and I shall try.to determine how and why they were translated the way they were. Some translations may also appear problematic, in the sense that the original meaning or effect of a joke was lost or diminished through translation. I shall then try to provide my own translation.

The French translation and adaptation of the dialogue in French was done by Jean-Jacques Pron, it will therefore be of interest to determine whether Pron conformed to one of the translation strategies describes earlier or whether he adapted his strategies depending on the need.

2. Theories of humor

As said earlier, what is at stake here is less the process of translation as a whole than the translation of humor in the sitcom. Therefore, it is important to understand the various theories related to humor, its construction and its effect. Several theories exist but three emerge as the major ones. Mulder & Nijholt[5] define these main theories as follows:

2.1. The superiority theory

The Superiority Theory dates back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, posits that "we laugh about the misfortunes of others; it reflects our own superiority." Plato theorizes that humor is a kind of malice we inflict on those we

[5] Mulder, M., & Nijholt, A. (2002). Humour Research: State of the Art.

deem inferior to us. Completed and renamed by Charles Gruner, the Superiority Theory of Humour proposes that a "winner" successfully mocks the "loser". Mulder & Nijholt hypothesized that that this theory could "explain the fun of some humorous television programs, like sitcoms and talk shows, and successful Hollywood movies" (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002, p. 3). Hespel (2023) explains that the "winner" adopts a superior position to the subject of his mockery, and sees self-deprecation as the "ultimate application" of the superiority theory. (Hespel, 2023, p. 17)

2.2. The Relief Theory

There is also the Relief Theory, which has been popularized By Freud among others. "Freud explains that this 'psychic energy' in our body is built as an aid for suppressing feelings in taboo areas, like sex or death. When this energy is released we experience laughter, not only because of the release of this energy, but also because these taboo thoughts are being entertained." (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002, p. 4) To Freud and Mulder & Nijholt, the relief theory appears therefore as a theory of laughter rather than of humor, laughing feels good but it doesn't explain why we laugh at something.

2.3. The Incongruity Theory

According to Kant[6], what makes us laugh is the incongruity between what we expect in a situation and what actually happens. Hespel adds that another form of incongruity is the "expression of fact contrary to the obvious"—irony (Hespel, 2023, p. 19). In *Friends*, when Ross complains that his wife just left him because she realized she was a lesbian, he says that he wants to be married again. At That precise moment Rachel enters the Central Perk dressed in wedding gown, seemingly answering Ross's wish. Chandler makes a joke by wishing for a million dollars, which fail to enter the café. We wouldn't normally expect a large sum of

[6] Kant, I. (2013). Critique of the power of judgment (P. Guyer, Ed.; E. Matthews, Trans.). Cambridge University Press

money to appear at the door, but after Rachel enters, that expectation is reaffirmed. The public laughs at the thought of Chandler expecting his wish to be realized (season 1, episode 1: *The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate*).

2.4. Humor in Friends

Hespel[7] makes a comprehensive list of the various forms of humor in *Friends*:

- Anecdotal humor: defined by a joke arising from an anecdote or a story.
- Risqué humor: defined by the use of shocking elements relating to taboo subjects such as sex, ethnic groups, gender, violence, blasphemy, pedophilia, death. It is considered vulgar and in bad taste.
- Dark humor: presents tragic situations in a humorous way.
- Cold humor: defined by the lack of facial expression from a character when the public would expect it, according to the humor of the situation.
- Irony: defined by the utterance of words while meaning their opposite
- Sarcasm: main form of humor in *Friends*, similar to irony but with a negative/mean aspect. Mostly used by Chandler in the form of rhetorical questions. Hespel notes that Chandler never intends to hurt but rather point out that what the other characters say is stupid, to him.
- Scatological/immature humor: defined by visual gags relying on bodily fluids, meant to cause embarrassment without lasting damage.
- Self-deprecation: using oneself as the object of a joke, usually relying on an aspect deemed negative
- Visual humor: humor based solely on visual aspects, pranks or situations.
- Slapstick: visual humor with a aspect of violence, of an exaggeration of movements.

[7] Hespel, S. (2023). La Traduction de l'humour Pour la Télévision: L'adaptation de l'humour Dans la Sitcom *Friends* (1st ed). Le Lys Bleu Éditions.

3. Complexities of Audiovisual translation (AVT)

In 2011, Pedro Mogorrón Huerta defines AVT in *Problèmes d'équivalence et perte d'information en traduction audiovisuelle*. He writes:

> *La TAV est une modalité de traduction subordonnée, c'est-à-dire qu'il s'agit d'une modalité de transfert interpolysystémique dans laquelle interviennent plusieurs codes linguistiques et extralinguistiques et qui possède des restrictions de temps et d'espace qui ont une incidence directe sur le résultat final du discours traduit.*
>
> AVT is a subordinate modality of translation, that is to say it is a modality of interpolysystemic transfer in which several linguistic and extralinguistic codes intervene and which possesses time and space restrictions which directly affect the final result of the translated speech.

Samuel Hespel explains in his 2023 essay *La traduction de l'humour pour la television*:

> *Lors du doublage, un acteur n'a qu'un temps limité pour prononcer ses dialogues parce que les images sont déjà tournées, elles ne peuvent pas être changes. Le traducteur doit traduire les dialogues de tous les personnages en s'assurant que les acteurs auront un nombre de mots raisonnable à prononcer à un rythme tout aussi raisonnable, tout en collant au mieux aux mouvements des lèvres des acteurs à l'image*.
>
> When dubbing, an actor only has a limited time to utter his dialogues because the images are already shot, they can't be changed. The translator has to translate the dialogues of each of his characters while making sure that the actors will have a reasonable number of words to utter at a pace just as reasonable, while conforming as best as possible to movement of the actors' lips on screen.

The translator has the difficult task of not only translating lines of dialogue but also choosing the right words to conform to the original timing and mouth movements of the actors on screen. This can become really difficult, considering the propensity of English to favor monosyllabic words and shorter sentences than French. Added to this main difficulty are the commercial constraints put on the

translator: set dates and time frames, as well as possible censorship from the channels or laws of the target language.

However, the translation heard in dubbing and the translation read in the subtitles rarely match perfectly. One main reason explains this lack of symmetry: the two modes of translation are commissioned to different companies; therefore, the same translator cannot possibly be responsible for both. As said earlier Jean-Jacque Pron was alone responsible for the adaptation of the entire dubbed version (with the exception of the pilot episode)[8] while the subtitles were done by two main translators: Laura Cynober and Stéphan Levine (except for season 3 where he was replaced by Isabelle Juhasz), Pascale Joseph also worked on season 1 in conjunction with Cynober and Levine—through the company TITRAFILM[9].

4. Data analysis

In this part, I shall attempt to analyze a number of humorous lines of dialogue which rely on cultural references, and they have been translated. For each instance I shall specify the episode as well as the precise time code at which the lines can be found in the episode. I shall try to explain what the specific cultural reference is in the original version and how it has been transposed to a cultural reference that is understandable to the French cultural sphere. Then I shall attempt to explain which translation theory has been used and finally propose my own translation when I deem the official translation too problematic, that is to say when the effect of the original gag is lost or diminished.

Episode 1: *The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate*

(15min29sec)

VO: MONICA: I can't stop smiling!

RACHEL: I can see that. You look like you slept with a hanger in your mouth.

[8] (Hespel, 2023, p. 134)
[9] https://www.fanfr.com/coulisses/soustitres.php

VF: MONICA: J'arrête pas de sourire bêtement!

RACHEL: Ah oui, je vois ça. On dirait que tu vas tourner une pub pour un dentifrice.

SUB: MONICA: J'arrête pas de sourire!

RACHEL: T'as dormi avec un cintre dans la bouche?

In this first example, we can see a few important differences between the different versions of this line. Monica has just had a seemingly great date with Paul, a "wine guy" as referred to by her friends earlier in the episode. Paul spent the night with Monica and we, the audience, assume they had sexual relations (Pual had confessed to Monica, he hadn't been able to perform for the past two years). Monica seems overly joyful after a supposedly successful night. Rachel points this by saying that she looks like she slept with a hanger in her mouth. This line causes heavy laughter from the public, because it's quite a preposterous scene to imagine and conveys adequately the large smile on Monica's face. This phrase is not an idiom and thus surprises the public. This example could fit with the incongruity theory mentioned above. Aside from the incongruous aspect of that imagery, it could also have a sexual undertone, the hanger being an unintentional euphemism for Monica's partner. Although this would be surprising from Rachel's character who seems rather prim and proper.

The subtitles keep the same imagery of the hanger, although the assertion is turned into a question: "did you sleep with a hanger in your mouth?" This is almost certainly due to the fact that subtitles need to be read quickly. Rachel's 15-word line is reduced to 8 words in the French subtitles, making it possible for the reader to capture the essence of the joke as quickly as if he were to hear it. However, "*I can see that*" is lost in the subtitles. Although the effect is slightly diminished from the assertiveness of the declarative sentence in English, the joke is kept. "*On dirait que t'as dormi avec un cintre dans la bouche*" would be a better translation, because it kept the visual comparison and the declarative sentence structure, however it is longer to read and doesn't add much value to the joke. The fact that

the line is shorter also shows the use of the compensation by merging mentioned earlier.

However, in the dubbed version, the hanger is completely forgotten about and replaced by another joke. It would be interesting to know why the translator chose to go with an ad for toothpaste rather than keep the original joke. As I mentioned earlier, Pron was not responsible for the adaptation of the pilot episode, the translator probably perceived it as a sexual inuendo as well and chose to remove this inuendo for the French audience. The toothpaste ad conveys the idea of the large smile, with the teeth in full view, but the incongruity of the hanger is completely lost, flattening the joke in my opinion.

Concerning translation theories and practices, we can see that the translation for dubbing adds the adjective "*bêtement*" ("stupidly") at the end of Monica's line, where it is absent in the original, therefore a creation on the part of the translator. This could also be an explication of the effect of Monica's smiling on her appearance: she looks a bit stupid, and she knows it. Rachel's response here is translated by the substitution of the hanger for the toothpaste ad, this could also be described as compensation in kind according to Hervey & Higgins's theories.

Episode 2: The One With The Sonogram At The End

(04min55sec)

VO: CHANDLER: Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew

MONICA: What?

CHANDLER: Ugly naked guy got a ThighMaster

VF: CHANDLER: Oh, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta

MONICA: Quoi?

CHANDLER: Regardez, l'tout nu pas beau il a acheté un tapis roulant.

SUB: CHANDLER: Le poilu d'en face se met à la muscu!

Here we can clearly see the need for efficiency in the subtitles. Chandler's expression of surprise and disgust and Monica's inquiry are completely absent, possibly to avoid eye fatigue for lines that are understandable beyond language barrier. However, the rest of Chandler's line is completely changed. Their neighbor in the building across the street seems to be regularly stark naked and a bit of an exhibitionist, judging by the attributed nickname, which seems to be well established among the group of friends. However, in the subtitles, he is just hairy, we don't know whether he is just shirtless or if more of his clothes are missing, severely diminishing the effect of the joke and thus over-exaggerating the friends' disgust towards their neighbor. Incidentally, said neighbor is not characterized as "hairy" in the original version, merely "naked" and "ugly".

The problematic cultural reference of this joke resides in the "ThighMaster", a seemingly well-known work-out gadget. The device designed to shape one's thighs was advertised on US television during the 1990s, mainly by the actress Suzanne Sommers. This device would have been completely unknown to the French public, and the English name would have been problematic as French television prioritizes French words. Therefore, the ThighMaster was replaced by a treadmill ("*tapis roulant*"), which is a very recognizable work-out machine in France. The imagery of the "*ugly naked guy*" using the ThighMaster, supposedly by placing the device between the legs and opening and closing the knees, is replaced in French by the imagery of "*le tout nu pas beau*" (a literal translation of the original nickname) running on his treadmill, his genitals bouncing around for all to see. The image is slightly displaced, but the effect remains the same. However the subtitles completely flatten the joke, the neighbor is not naked anymore, simply hairy, and he is simply working-out ("*la muscu*").

Chandler's first line and Monica's response were deleted in the subtitles, and the message was substituted for a another which is completely different. "*Le poilu*" is a compensation by merging, combining "ugly naked guy" into one word, "*d'en face*" was added (explication), and "*se met à la muscu*" is a compensation in kind. In the VF, Chandler's expression of surprise "ew, ew, …", typical of spoken English was adapted by a compensation in kind, to a slightly less common

equivalent in French "*Oh, ta, ta, ...*". The translator also added "*Regardez*", compelling his friends to look out of the window, an injunction which is absent in the original text. The ThighMaster was adapted by a compensation in kind as well.

Episode 4: The One With George Stephanopoulos

(17min21sec)

VO: MONICA: Hello? Were we at the same table? It's like… cocktails in Appalachia.

VF: MONICA: Quoi, qu… quoi? Mais tu n'as pas vu ce qu'ils font à table? On dirait qu'ils vont se grimper dessus dans le restaurant.

SUB: MONICA: Coucou! On est à la même table? On dirait… des anges et des insectes.

Joey wants to reignite the flame with his ex-girlfriend Angela, but she is in a relationship with Bob. Joey proposes a double date with the couple and Monica, posing as his girlfriend. Joey lies to Monica, saying that Bob is Angela's brother and he tries to convince her to go on a double date with her. This would be an opportunity for Joey to seduce Angela, and for Monica to have a date with Bob. However, at the restaurant, Angela and Bob display some physical affection. Angela also confides in Monica in the restrooms that Bob is great in bed. This leads Monica to believe that Bob and Angela are siblings who engage in incestuous relations. This explains the joke she makes to Joey in an aside: "Like Cocktails in Appalachia". This perceived closeness between Bob and Angela makes Monica think they must be in Appalachia—a mountainous region in the Eastern United States, from the south of New York State through Pennsylvania to Georgia. There is a long-standing stereotype that family members in the hills of Appalachia engage in incestuous activities. Thus, Monica compares this brotherly closeness to having cocktails in Appalachia.

In the VF, any explicit reference to incest would have been rejected by the channel, which explains why the reference in the dubbed version is quite implicit: Monica simply says that the couple is getting a bit too physical and they seem to be about to "*climb onto each other*". In this case, a calque would have been possible but totally incomprehensible to the French audience, the incestuous stereotype of the Appalachia is completely unknown to the French.

The subtitles do a good job of translating the indirect reference to incest using a cultural reference. "*Des Anges et des Insectes*" (angels and insects), can seem quite obscure of a reference in 2025 but would have been understood in the 1990s. this reference is a nod to a 1995 movie by Philip Haas. This movie is based on a 1992 novel by A.S. Byatt.

> "The movie is a study of a family of country gentry in Victorian England. William Adamson (Mark Rylance), a young scientist, is introduced into the Alabaster family by Sir Harald Alabaster (Jeremy Kemp) who is also fascinated by insects. William marries the elder daughter of the family and studies the amounts of insects in the garden of the villa. His - for the gentry - strange behaviors reveal at the same time their own failures and passions. —Volker Boehm"[10]

The movie is rated R for strong sexuality and graphic nudity. Indeed, Eugenia Alabaster engages in graphic incestuous relations with Edgar, her brother, who is the true father of her four children.

In France, the movie was presented to the Festival de Cannes, in May 1995. However, the movie did not receive a clear commercial success, not featuring in the list of movies which made over 1 million entries. The incestuous reference is therefore understandable to the French public but is as indirect as the original reference.

Pron completely omitted the reference in the VF, he employed the deletion or omission practice mentioned earlier, a part of the message from the original text was deleted in the translation. Here the part of the message that was deleted was the subtext, the implicit reference to incest. In the subtitles, Cynober, chose to employ the "compensation in kind" technique, replacing an element and its effect

[10] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112365/

in the source material with another element equivalent in effect in the target language. I would argue that Cynober's approach is more ingenuous but again, she was not constrained to the same restrictions as Pron and had more liberties with her translation.

If I were to translate this line today, I would have two options: choose a reference appropriate to the time frame of the sitcom but run the risk of not being understood by the audience or choose a reference which would be understood by the public but run the risk of being anachronistic. *Angels and Insects* is a good choice for the first option, but not really immediately understood today, thirty years after the movie's release. For the second option, the incestuous relationship between Cersei and Jamie Lanister in *Game of Thrones* could be a good alternative.

Episode 6: The One With The Butt

(08min46sec)

VO: ROSS: Oh come on, when we were kids, yours was the only Raggedy Ann doll that wasn't raggedy !

VF: ROSS: Roh tu parles, quand on était tout petits, tu étais la seule à ressortir du bac à sable plus propre qu'en y entrant !

SUB: ROSS: Etant gosse, tu avais une poupée en chiffon pas chiffonnée !

The group of friends come back to Monica's apartment, where Rachel has just cleaned. Monica notices a piece of furniture has been moved and she puts it back. Her friends proceed to tease her about how obsessive she can be with her cleaning. Phoebe makes a reference to the shower murder scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Ross makes a comment on her childhood doll. The doll is a Raggedy Ann, a popular character in the United States. Raggedy Ann, a rag doll with red yarn for hair, is originally a children's book character from 1918 created by Johnny Gruelle. It notably gained importance in pop culture in the 1970s after the supposed hauntings of Annabelle, a Raggedy Ann doll now housed at the Warren's Occult

Museum. The horror genre capitalized on the legend and featured the doll as a prop or sometimes as a main character (Child's Play 2, Bump in the Night, The Conjuring). This explains the relevance of Ross's comment both in terms of obsessiveness on Monica's part and following Phoebe's reference to *Psycho*. Ross's play on words resides in the adjective "raggedy": an informal word meaning tattered or torn to rags. The fact that an inherently tattered doll would remain pristine in the hands of young Monica shows how obsessively clean she is. Both French versions do a good job of conveying the idea and its effect with more or less the same intensity. In English, Monica's doll was the only one of its kind to remain clean, however in the subtitles Monica's doll simply happened to not be tattered, the idea is preserved but the effect is slightly diminished. We have here a "compensation in kind" from Cynober. "*Etant gosse, tu avais la seule poupée de chiffon pas chiffonnée !*" would be a better translation because it keeps the idea that Monica was the only one to have such a doll.

In Pron's translation, the doll has been replaced by a sand box. Children are known to come out very dirty and dusty from a sandbox after playing in it. The obsessiveness of Monica cleanliness is thus transposed from her possessions to her own person. Coming out of a sandbox cleaner than when entering it is practically impossible. This joke fits well with the incongruity and anecdotal theories of humor mentioned earlier. I would argue that Pron also slightly explicated the joke, making Monica's OCD more apparent with the idea of her own personal cleanliness rather than just her caring for her toys. But this shift might also be due to the needs of dubbing, Pron probably chose to translate this line the way he did because he thought it would fit well with the lip movements of the actors.

Cynober could be a good translation for the dubbed version, if the words fit nicely with the lip movements, which would require verification from a professional, although I would slightly modify it: "*quand on était tout petits, tu avais la seule poupée de chiffon pas chiffonnée!*" this would keep the longer phrasing of Pron, with the correct image of the rag doll from the original, adapted for a public unfamiliar with the brand *Raggedy Ann*. It might slightly dim the effect rendered by Pron original translation, but it would be closer to the original text.

Episode 12: The One With The Dozen Lasagnas

(03min00sec)

VO: PAOLO: [speaking Italian]

RACHEL: Honey, you can say it, Poconos, Poconos, it's like Poc-o-nos [touching Paolo's nose with forefinger with each syllable]

PAOLO: Ah, poke-a-nose [Paolo touches Rachel's nose with each word] mmm [they rub noses, then kisses her]

CHANDLER, JOEY, ROSS: [together] Bleh, bleh, bleh …

[public laughs]

MONICA: So, did I hear Poconos?

RACHEL: Yes, my sister's giving us her place for the weekend.

PHOEBE: Woo-hoo, first weekend away together!

MONICA: Yeah, that's a big step.

VF: PAOLO: [avec un accent italien] Mais je n'ai pas envie de manger de glace.

RACHEL: Mais je te parle pas de glace, je te parle d'un baiser esquimau, esquimau, et c'est juste … avec … le nez [touche le nez de Paolo avec son index trois fois]

PAOLO: Juste … avec … le nez [ils se frottent le nez et Paolo l'embrasse]

CHANDLER, JOEY, ROSS: [ensemble] Beurk, beurk, beurk …

[rires du public]

MONICA: On a parlé de baiser d'esquimau ?

RACHEL: Oui, ma soeur nous prête sa maison pour le week-end.

PHOEBE: Woo-hoo, le premier week-end à s'envoyer en l'air !

MONICA: Bonjour les valises sous yeux

SUB: RACHEL: Tu peux le dire ! “Tâtonner.” Comme : Tâte-ton-nez.

PAOLO: Tâte-ton-nez.

MONICA: Qu’est-ce que j’entends ?

RACHEL: Ma soeur nous prête sa baraque ce week-end.

PHOEBE: Votre premier week-end !

MONICA: C’est un grand pas.

This dialogue was completely changed in both French versions. It is easy to understand why: the whole humorous passage relies on a play on word Rachel makes to teach Paolo how to pronounce the name of the place where they will spend the weekend. To Rachel, Poconos, a mountainous region west of New York, sounds like “Poke a nose”, this pun is obviously based on the American English pronunciation and would be completely impossible to replicate in French. The start of the conversation that ensues between the three girls continues on the subject of Poconos. Jean-Jacques Pron and Pascale Joseph took two different routes for the translation.

For the dubbed version, Pron went with what appeared on screen: Paolo rubs his nose on Rachel’s before kissing her, which is why Pron chose to replace Poconos with a story about ice-cream, “*un esquimau*” also means ice-cream in French. Pron managed to translate a play on words with another which would work in French and would still be relevant to the images on screen. The rest of the conversation seems to come a bit out of nowhere, the link between an Eskimo kiss and Rachel’s sister giving her her place for the weekend is tenuous at best. This link completely disappears in the subtitles, “tâtonner” does allow Joseph to translate a play on word which is very close to the original text, but it has nothing to do with the rest of the conversation. In Pron’s translation, Monica and Phoebe’s last lines make for bad translations because they are way off the original meaning. Phoebe’s comment is simply a remark on Rachel and Paolo’s first weekend together, her “woo-hoo” could have an implicit sexual connotation but she remains

the innocent girl we know her to be, Pron turns her into a fully grown adult, spurting sexual jokes out loud. And Monica's line is the same, Pron gives her a line with a heavy sexual connotation, alluding to the busy nights Rachel and Paolo will have in Poconos, while in the original Monica's line is more centered around the evolution of her friend's relationship.

Interestingly, similarly to the example from episode 2, the subtitles tend not to translate the interjections from the characters: "ew, ew, ew, …", "woo-hoo", "bleh, bleh, bleh", these utterances tend to be understood despite their different form in the target language and therefore don't need to be translated. They are also not proper lexical or grammatical words but rather sounds with a culturally defined meaning and have a lesser importance to the understanding of the message. They would also flood the subtitles. One advantage of the subtitles is that they can leave these interjections for the public to hear and give them to read only the sentences.

Pron's compensation in kind is a good compromise between the message to be translated and the constraints of the linguistics, of the cultural reference, and of AVT. I would only change the last two lines to remain closer to the original text:

PHOEBE: Woo-hoo, votre premier week-end ensemble !

MONICA: Oui, c'est une grosse étape.

5. Comparing with more recent sitcom Brooklyn Nine Nine

This part would explore how the cultural references are dealt with in a more recent sitcom (i.e. after the democratization of the Internet and the development of a world-wide media pop culture). *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, was aired on FOX (season 1-5) and NBC (seasons 6-8) between 2013 and 2021. It was adapted into French by the Nice Fellow company under the direction of Cyrille Artaux (Stéphane

Salvetti, Rodolph Freytt, Olivier Lips)[11] Despite its initial release in French on Canal+ Séries, I had access to it on *Netflix*.

Season 8 Episode 1: The Good Ones

(02min35sec)

VO: TERRY: Setting up a new business takes time. She's probably too busy to see friends

JAKE: And yet, I have time to see my friends, and to be a father, and do my job, and straight up crush it at Goat Simulator on my Switch

VF: TERRY: Monter sa boite ça prend du temps. Elle est trop occupée pour voir ses amis

JAKE: Pardon mais moi j'ai bien le temps de voir mesa mis, d'être un père, de faire mon boulot et de tout déchirer à Goat Simulator sur ma console.

SUB: TERRY: Lancer sa boîte, ça demande beaucoup de boulot.

JAKE: J'ai le temps de voir mesa mis, d'étre père, de travailler, et de déchirer à Goat Simulator.

It is clear that *Goat Simulator* is a video game. In the original the console on which Jake plays is named: the Switch, by Nintendo. But in the dubbed version the console remains unnamed, generic, probably due to not wanting to advertise for the console, and in the subtitles the console is not mentioned. What is clear here is that the name of the game, despite its English name, is not changed in the French versions. The title of the game would have probably been translated to "*simulateur de chèvre*" or just omitted and generalized to "*jeux-vidéos*" in the dubbed version if it had been translated at the same time as an episode of *Friends*. *Goat Simulator* isn't a widely popular game, but it is still known in France as fringe game, with no real purpose other than pretending to be a goat and evolving in nature from the

[11] http://www.dsd-doublage.com/S%E9ries/Brooklyn%20Nine-Nine.html

point of view of a goat. This demonstrates a tendency towards Venuti's foreignization in more recent AVTs.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I wanted to analyze how cultural references in the humor of the American sitcom *Friends* had been translated into French, both in the dubbed version and in the subtitled one. By comparing selected lines from both versions to each other and to the original text, I wished to shed light on the translation strategies used by the various translators: source-oriented, target-oriented, deletion, compensation, adaptation, … and the various mechanisms at play in the cultural adaptation in audiovisual translation. This study identified and categorized the strategies employed, the reasons why they were employed and the effect on the humor of the resulting translations. My findings shed light not only on the linguistic reasoning behind these choices but also on the underlying commercial and production constraints of audiovisual translation and cultural mediation.

The most surprising of the findings in this analysis was the fact that the dubbing of *Friends* tends to favor domestication. The American cultural references are frequently adapted or replaced to better suit the cultural expectations of the French audience. The substitution of culturally specific references with analogous French references or more universally understood equivalents shows a clear orientation toward making the dialogue as relatable and accessible as possible for the French-speaking audience. However, in more recent AVTs, domestication is limited to plays on words or brands, and cultural references are mostly kept. This foreignization was already present in earlier subtitling, which reflects the viewer's expectation for linguistic authenticity and fidelity to the original dialogues. Viewers who favor original audio with subtitles often do so as a way to improve their linguistic skills and expect the subtitles to be as close to a literal translation as possible. But this emphasis on fidelity often runs the risk of weakening the humorous effect of a joke when the expected background cultural knowledge is absent.

Translating humor appears therefore especially challenging. When a gag relies on a pun, a play on words, an idiom, translators must resort to creative compensation strategies to recreate the comedic effect when direct translation is impossible or insufficient. Being more technically flexible, dubbing offers a larger creative space for translators to adapt a joke, especially when the actor's lips are not clearly visible or filmed from farther away. But when the lips are visible, synchronism is a must, and the translator often uses omissions or substitutions to circumvent the linguistic problems of the source language. Subtitling is less flexible than dubbing, because the translator is limited by the number of characters that can appear onscreen for a given line and by the speed at which the viewer can read the line comfortably and still understand the message completely. AVT choices are shaped both by cultural considerations and technical constraints.

Over the last three decades, practices have evolved, and episodes of *Friends* aired over 30 years ago don't necessarily reflect the translation practices and strategies of today. As was demonstrated with the more recent examples, there is an increasing trend in foreignization, in preserving as much of the source culture as possible, creating a wave of cultural literacy. With the democratization of the Internet and the boom in streaming platforms offering a number of dubbed and subbed versions of a given movie or show, audiences around the world and their respective cultures become increasingly connected, rendering the need for excessive domestication more and more outdated. This shift allows the public to develop an understanding and an appreciation for a wide range of cultures.

The translation of *Friends* and its comparative analysis, allowed for the examination of the blending of source-oriented and target-oriented strategies in AVT. Comparing the dubbed and subbed versions allowed us to reveal the translator not only as a linguistic mediator but also as a cultural mediator. No single strategy emerged as prevalent, which shows that the success of translation does not rely on the strategy employed but in its result, in its ability to maintain the semantic elements of a message while making it understandable in the target language, with as much of its cultural weight as possible. I hope to have shown translation not only as a linguistic exercise but as a thought-out process of cultural mediation.

Further analysis of more recent sitcoms or other types of culturally charged, humorous programs could prove beneficial, as would an examination of audience reception of the translated versions. This could provide more information on the success of the mediation of the source culture, and whether the different demographics understand the jokes. A study of automated translation in a comedic context would also be very interesting. Even if AV translators use the help of machines to streamline their work, their role remains crucial in shaping intercultural understanding.

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